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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS:
DIMENSIONS OF REFLECTION IN THE ARTS THERAPIES

Edited by
Richard Hougham, Salvo Pitruzzella and Sarah Scoble

This book examines notions of reflection within the arts therapies, reaching into the heartland of the philosophy, practice and research of these professions. In the process, it challenges assumed and orthodox interpretations of reflection and introduces new ideas and emergent pedagogies of the imagination.

In each of the chapters, ideas on reflection resonate in a cyclical and non-linear fashion, whether outlined in the context of research, the therapeutic relationship or artistic practice. Underneath it all is a movement to reframe reflection as embodied, symbolic and inherently imaginal. These themes in turn go some way to contribute to the future shaping of the theory, practice and research in the arts therapies.

This book contributes towards an epistemological shift, where the complexities of the intersubjective realm are shaped through the arts, and the positivism, which has dominated the construction of knowledge for so long, is challenged.

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- SHOHAT, E. (1995). *Talking visual multicultural feminism in a transitional age*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art Press.
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THE DIALECTIC IN MOTION: A CONCEPT AND PHYSICAL RESOURCE FOR ARTS THERAPISTS' CRITICAL REFLECTION

ANNA SEYMOUR

SYNOPSIS

In the arts therapies we have the potential to draw on multiple dimensions of the arts through which to interrogate and reflect upon our practice. We begin from the belief that the artforms themselves contain the potential to heal through the aesthetics, structures and expressivity of their forms explicitly employed within the therapeutic relationship.

This chapter is devoted to theatre praxis. Its intention is to examine physical, practical experiences that focus aesthetic practices for the purpose of critical reflection. The methodologies described work within a theatre tradition committed to social change and centred on a dialectical approach to theatre process.

The chapter will use the movement phrase of *Otkaz, Posil, Tochka*, taken from the theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), as a significant example. This 'dialectic in motion' was intended to create a theatre that could respond to the period of post-revolutionary reconstruction in Russia. Efficiency and rational control of the actor's body informed the process of the 'bright new system' called 'Biomechanics'.

The chapter will consider how attunement to the art form itself may provide a framework for ongoing personal development and critical analysis particularly in the contexts of training and supervision. It will promote the rigours of artistic discipline regarding these processes as both inspirational and as a source of resilience and nourishment for the arts therapist.

It will also explore the problematics and opportunities of applying such a process.

In exploring such tensions as creative material for further examination, it will argue that the dialectical process, both conceptually and practically, offers a productive response to these challenges.

Keywords: dramatherapy, dialectic, praxis, embodiment.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers the embodiment of a philosophical idea - the dialectic - its place in the theatre, potentiality for critical reflection and as a guide to action. In the spirit of Lakoff and Johnson's argument (1999), it considers 'philosophy in the flesh'. The notion rests on the proposition that before an idea can be conceived, the material conditions for its production need to be available. In the present context, the ways in which this 'materiality' is manifest is through 'bodily knowing' and expression.

Thought and reason do not exist outside the materiality and viscosity of the body. They are not transcendent entities existing separately from the body, nor is there any possibility of thought, which is not shaped by the details of our embodiment (Rowe, 2000, p.13).

The dramatherapist Nick Rowe builds on Lakoff and Johnson's thesis in the dramatherapy context and notes how they identify the prevalence of 'spatial, body-in-space metaphors.'

These are the concerns of the arts therapist. In both metaphorical and literal senses the proxemics of spatial distribution are interpreted as expressions of feeling and being in relationship.

'I hit a brick wall'

'I wanted to fly away'

In each of these examples we can see how the conception of the action is both condensed in expression, through the economy of the symbolic use of language, whilst at the same time it is expanded by the poetic nature of the

choice of vocabulary. In this sense a dialectical tension is at work where the 'ordinary' becomes 'elevated' because it is expressed by reference to an idea which is outside of itself. The metaphor becomes dramatic, creating a glimpse of a context to be inhabited by individual narrative.

In a number of interesting ways Naomi Rokatnitz (2011), through the analysis of four play texts of different genres from different periods, argues that the human capacity for reciprocity and shared meaning emerges from learning through the body. The intersection of biological propensity and cultural conditioning is unquestioningly subject to prevailing political and social conditions.

However, the theatre attempts to capture in a given moment the complex multiplicities of histories, experiences and somatic responses and to share meaning in a social space. The theatre creates material presence whilst at the same time engaging with the 'immaterial' of feeling and imagination. This tension we can describe as a complex dialectical discourse.

Whatever we do is always predicated on what we already know, as Brecht says, 'the old always limps along with the new' (Brecht, 1980, p.323). These tensions are also played out when we engage with the art form to reflect on therapeutic practice.

In the constructed space where a workshop takes place, seeking to provide an opportunity for reflection on practice, a number of things happen: incidental, nuanced, slippages occur. Small details of recent and historic experiences are stirred or shift, buried in the gut. Beneath expectant faces and the silence of anticipation individual and shared narratives coalesce... needs surface... a group looks for a structure, what is to be done?

The need for metaphor to hold the process emerges.

What follows will be a brief revisiting of familiar territory in the use of metaphor within theatre praxis, where the methodologies described are drawn from a theatre tradition committed to social change and centred on a dialectical approach to theatre process.

We will then return to consider how these processes may become a resource for critical reflection for the arts therapist.

WORKING WITH THEATRICAL METAPHOR

Metaphor allows us to step into the 'as if' world. The ironic nature of metaphor is such that, by detaching part of the self to project into metaphor, it enables a paradoxically closer engagement with what is being explored. This is a fundamental principle of drama, that in a delineated space, demarcated from everyday activity, for however brief a time, a metaphorical 'otherness' is created with the other theatrical elements. This detachment, however, needs to be constructed in such a way that it is meaningful for participants, in order that the metaphor can do its work. Stanislavski's (1863-1938) early work, influenced by the psychologist Theodule Ribot (1839-1916) particularly in the area of affective memory, introduced the concept of 'as if' what is happening on the stage is 'real life'. He did so against the backdrop of the contrivance and artificiality of late 19th Century theatre. His desire to make a truthful and 'authentic' theatre can be seen as an almost religious zeal, as he conceived of the relationship between audience and actor as a form of communion. The theatre would become 'good for the soul,' it would be uplifting and recognisable.

Stanislavski's moral mission may be shared by the therapist but undoubtedly there is a necessity to adopt an aesthetic vocabulary in practice, whether consciously or unconsciously employed. Stanislavski's idea of projective identification is one which profoundly connects with our thinking in dramatherapy, but if we expand the frame, and think about the role of the actor in different periods, other functions emerge. For instance Diderot's (1830) *Paradoxe sur le Comedien* explained the actor's process as one of enabling the audience to feel, not the actor. He went so far as to say that the actor's task was to focus on the technical ability to induce feeling in the audience, rather than enact their own feelings, i.e. 'feel themselves' on stage. Similarly, Brecht (1898-1956) is concerned that the actor is able to aim for detachment by treating their character as a third person and expressing the role through gestic acting.

The *gestus* is the physical demonstration of behaviour observable in social settings that reveals the character's social role. Brecht is concerned to understand the impact of the political/social environment on human relations and how this is embodied and manifest in behaviour. A good example is 'how a poor man eats cheese' in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (Brecht, 1963). The 'poor man' does not gulp down the piece of cheese but carefully pares it in thin slices, better to savour this rare treat and mindful that he does not know where his next food will come from. Thus poverty is embodied in countless moments of expression and captured in the 'social gest' of the theatrical moment.

Unlike in the Stanislavskian tradition, the 'authenticity' of the theatrical action in Brechtian theatre derives from the detached 'bracketing' of physical action. It is put into an aesthetic frame or *mise-en-scene* so that each action becomes emblematic of larger experiences and contexts. Brecht accounts for the capacity to experience distancing by actors and audience through his theory of 'alienation'. Whilst not the subject of this chapter, it is worth noting that Brecht derives his notion of alienation from Marx's analysis of power relations in capitalism. Brecht translates this political understanding into aesthetic terms by considering how it predisposes both actors and audience to be simultaneously engaged in and detached from the construction of space and action on stage. If we further consider this in psychological terms, it helps us understand how we can never be fully 'at home' inside ourselves. There is a permanent disjuncture between the inner self and the exterior world and this is internalised into a permanent unease with the self to some degree.

As Willy Loman memorably says, 'I still feel kinda temporary about myself' (Miller 2000).

Again we encounter an existential dialectical tension which is harnessed for aesthetic purposes. The negative effects of 'estrangement' and 'distancing' are turned to creative ends, they become 'productive anxieties' thorough which growth may take place.

If we turn to Meyerhold's theatre, we encounter something even more stylised and prescriptive in its formulation. Jonathan Pitches' account of Meyerhold's production of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* is a useful example. Whilst adopting Stanislavski's process of dividing the play into sections he departed

from his mentor's emphasis on the continuity of the play, which emphasised the Aristotelian unities. Instead, Meyerhold split the five act structure into fifteen *episodes*. This produced a number of effects:

1. It allowed for multiple settings whereby each segment could be viewed individually like a 'small play' within itself or, as Meyerhold himself put it, "thought in theatrical form" (cited in Pitches, 2003, p.92)
2. The episodic form allowed for different juxtapositions using montage in the filmic tradition of *mise-en-scene*.

These methods allowed greater flexibility and movement within the play. An agility within the structure, a utilitarian capacity without sacrificing aesthetic complexity, and the strategy of rational detachment based on the concept of *ostranie* or 'estrangement' was central to the approach. Whilst this has a specific and technical interpretation, we can also recognise the evocative nature of the term 'estrangement'. Applied to the human condition it could suggest exclusion, banishment, painful parting and separation. It can also evoke different landscapes, from family relationships to demographic shifts across continents.

In Meyerhold's theatre there is a 'strangeness' in the physical action and the representation of the drama. Just as his mentor Stanislavski before him, Meyerhold sought to recreate theatre to meet the needs of the time, and thus, whilst he was schooled in Stanislavskian method (more popularly known now, through the work of Russian émigrés to the US, as *The Method*), he felt the naturalistic theatre was becoming overburdened with attention to fussy detail, overdressed sets and ponderous dramas with extensive stage directions, and with actors restricted by their characters' individual psychology. In many ways these developments worked against Stanislavski's original intentions as the theatrical processes of themselves threatened to obscure the content and purposes of the drama rather than reveal them. It was thus in this climate that Meyerhold developed his system of actor training known as Biomechanics.

MEYERHOLD AND BIOMECHANICS (1913-22)

Born in 1874, Meyerhold was executed under the Stalinist purges in 1940. The details of his final days of incarceration are described in Edward Braun's (1993) moving account written when, under the terms of *Perestroika*, archival information of those dark times were finally made available to scholars. Despite Meyerhold's official disgrace, Stanislavski continued to regard him as his favoured pupil and described him as 'his heir'

As Brecht sought to develop a 'theatre for the scientific age', so Meyerhold wanted to create a theatre responsive to the industrial post-revolutionary context. He said: 'Movement is the most powerful means of theatrical expression,' and thus developed Biomechanics - 'a bright new system' - as a rational process of actor training. The rigorous system aimed to refine the actor's (i) balance and physical control (ii) rhythmic awareness, and (iii) responsiveness to partners (fellow actors), audience and external stimuli. By exercising in these techniques, which I describe below, the actor develops extraordinary skills of plasticity which are available to the realisation of the text. They also develop a constant awareness of themselves in space, displaying no emotion, attempting to develop a 'neutrality', through which gesture might then be introduced to epitomise the expression of feeling.

There are, however, other crucially important features of Meyerhold's conception of theatre, which emerged through the material historical circumstances of his time. Following 1917, in the period of post-revolutionary reconstruction, the emphasis on building a new society on a vast scale required efficiency, productivity and collectivity. With enormous numbers of people working in factories, there was an interest in 'Taylorism' - ideas of time-and-motion management exported from the very different context of the US - but here translated into the drive to build a society for all, where workers could become skilled without superfluous movement, have control over the productive process, and control over the use of their energy for the good of all. This collective enterprise is reflected in Meyerhold's conception of ensemble, where the actors are 'partners' on the stage with an awareness of the total *mise-en-scene* and the capacity to control and contain the stage action, its form, content and delivery.

Two exercises will illustrate this:

The orientation in space

The movement phrase of *Otkaz*, *Posil*, *Tochka*

THE ORIENTATION IN SPACE

References to biomechanical exercises are taken from the author's training over several years (2002-7) with Gennadi Bogdanov, Moscow Theatre of Satire.

The partners (actors) walk in the space. They are encouraged to become aware of the floor, ceiling, walls, windows, lights and every feature of the room. They are encouraged to 'know' the room, its edges, surfaces and textures. They are encouraged to become aware of the sense of the space and how they are in it at any given time. This slow process takes on a meditative quality as the partners are encouraged to find the space 'interesting', to know it as if it is another partner in a shared drama. The partners are encouraged to continually find what is interesting in the space, not through creating an expression of interest, but by imbibing the space and responding to it with interest though focused attention.

As awareness of other partners is brought into attention, partners are encouraged to move with the sense of knowing, at any given time, where everyone is - where am I in relation to the others?

As in meditative practices this need for attention becomes 'boring', yet, at the same time, the knowledge of the space renders it 'safe', in so far as its properties and dimensions become known to the partners.

The partners are encouraged to think how they hold and control the space through their knowledge and awareness.

THE MOVEMENT PHRASE OF *STOIKA*, *OTKAZ*, *POSIL*, *TOCHKA*

This movement sequence consists of the following:

Stoika – the 'stance' where the body is alert and poised, with preparedness for

next action. Eugenio Barba (2006) refers to this as a state of pre-expressivity which exists in many performance practices across cultures.

Otkaz – the 'refusal', movement in the opposite direction to the intended direction - where the force is gathered to propel the body into the next phase.

Posil – the 'sending', is the actual movement.

Tochka – the 'ending', moving into the *stoika*, ready for next action.

In physical embodied terms we see how the moment of 'going backwards in order to go forwards' becomes effectively 'the dialectic in motion'. The necessity to 'go backwards' is a physiological impulse, but in this context it is rationally controlled to train the actor's body in the service of the drama. Within this conception, each action contains a movement sequence allowing for the intention, direction and, ultimately, quality and attitude to be controlled.

The moment of *Otkaz*, in biomechanics termed 'the refusal', can be of particular significance for arts therapists' practice. It is not a moment of 'I can't go on', it is a moment of rational decision, to 'refuse' to go forward at this point in order to take control of gathering the necessary resources that make movement forward possible. It is an optimistic position that in metaphorical terms does not question its possibility but accepts that sufficient resources need to be available for movement to take place. It embraces the dialectical tension whereby the balance of power between 'backwards and forwards' is in contradiction and the struggle between the two provides the ultimate impetus to move forward whereby the impulse to remain in the position of refusal is overturned.

In developing this system, Meyerhold drew on other theatrical influences, primarily the Commedia dell'Arte where each mask has a given 'physical score of action' but at the same time individual actors develop their own *repertorio*, which can encompass the characteristics of the role.

These disciplines produce a formalised style of theatre, which, to modern audiences, can look frankly odd. However, the purpose of this chapter is not to suggest that arts therapists need to discipline the body and thinking to the

extent of professional actors, just as we would similarly not expect therapists to become like Grotowski's actors in the Poor Theatre, eviscerated sacrificial objects. Yet what we learn from these aesthetic practices helps us to reflect on our own praxis, the ideas that underpin and inform our attitudes to and explanations of embodied work.

PROBLEMATICS OF WORKING WITH THE BIOMECHANICAL SYSTEM

When engaging with his techniques it soon becomes apparent that there are problematics in working with Meyerhold's system. If we move into the reflective context of the arts therapists' process, we might ask how does the individual fit within the collective project? What about individual need, choice and expressivity? These are all legitimate and important questions that challenge ideological belief as well as personal taste. However, these questions arise from personal histories experienced within our own collective of common shared experience. In western society, where individual rights are inconsistently *applied*, definitions of identity are in flux. People feel alienated from the world in which they live, where lived experience conflicts with public rhetoric.

The fragmentation of individualism leads to a vacuum of anxiety, which is filled by attempts to recreate the sense of communality that has been ripped from the heart of many a community. We see this in the continual struggle to recreate 'community' in so many walks of life, from choirs to football supporters. We grope towards belonging in order to ease the pain of 'estrangement'.

And herein lies the nub of the problem.

On the one hand, pursuing the logic of the desire to belong, there is a need to look for shared opportunities of expression. On the other hand there is a question of trust – what set of ideas or practices can be trusted – where might I feel safe? How is that judgement made?

This conflict is internalised as individual participants engage in private reflection during a group activity. The questions could be put simply – I want to move forward with the group but what will happen to me? How can I do

this and still retain my own expressivity? Or it can be expressed as a conflicted assertion – I don't want to do this because it does not serve my needs, it does not allow me to express what I want to express.

These core questions about identity within a group impinge on the aesthetics of praxis in engaging with biomechanics. The system encourages a temporary 'suspension of disbelief' as participants are encouraged to imagine themselves unquestionably as members of a group engaged in collective endeavour (even if this is not the case). They are encouraged to put individual concerns to one side to enter into a prescribed set of activities that challenge the desire for individual expressivity.

Individuals are encouraged to engage with the body but within the control of a rational perspective. Without the detachment of this 'estrangement' or 'alienation', which is consciously evoked, the exercises can feel counterintuitive or repressive. The anxieties provoked by these exercises precisely engage with what has already been termed 'productive anxiety' the necessity to encounter resistance towards 'losing the self'. Yet it is precisely this dialectical tension that enables a potential for a different knowing of the self through a collective experience – to quote a truism of therapeutic practice we may experience being the 'same but different'.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter cannot conclude without reference to the larger theoretical concerns around the notion of the unified subject of modernity, but this reference will remain as such - a mention. The concern of the chapter has been to bring into discussion a core philosophical/ political idea of the dialectic and to suggest a practical and theoretical examination of how it works. By addressing the work of particular theatre practitioners I have attempted to bring together concerns about how theatre acts as a place of reflection, and how change takes place in society. Theatre not only responds and reflects change, it seeks to be a part of it. At the core of any creative act is the compression that occurs when boundaries are set. The question of how and why these boundaries are set, and what characterises them, is one of specificity in the given circumstances. Nonetheless these choices are conditioned by the prevailing ideas of the time and how they are subjectively experienced and embodied by participants. One

thing is for sure - there will always be these restrictions as a necessary part of creativity as Rowan Williams recently said:

"Selfhood is formed through intense compression. We are pressed into being. [...] The self is under the process of construction through physical metaphor. [...] we become ourselves through the unbearable moment where pressure dissolves who we think we are into becoming who we might be."

(Rowan Williams, second annual Gerard Manley Hopkins lecture, University of Roehampton 26th March 2014)

We can draw from the practices of a theatrical art form from another era in order to help reflect on our arts therapies practice, but with a caveat, such as Alan Read applies to contemporary theatre:

"An ethical theatre cannot be produced in the purpose-build design of another time. It can only be built as a response, and with a responsibility to its traditions with constant attention to a vocabulary drawn from the frontier disciplines that press upon its borders, new ways of describing the problematics of place, aesthetic value and audience that are central to its continued existence."

(Read, 1993, p.6)

Always we want to move forward, but we also need to move back. The one cannot happen without the other. Sometimes it is necessary or desirable to 'stay back' for a while, but the dialectical impulse of life beckons us forward, and this is why the dialectic is an important concept for both embodiment and thought.

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